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SUBJECT: VENEZUELAN REACTION TO THE 2009 IRF REPORT

REF: SECSTATE 10856

Classified By: Political Counselor Robin D. Meyer,
for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

1. (C) Summary: Reaction to the 2009 International Religious Freedom (IRF) report has been muted in Venezuela, despite initial press headlines implying that the report grouped Venezuela and Cuba together. A short October 28 article in the government paper Diario Vea said "all religions enjoy total freedom and respect," and explained that only when religious groups release "political diatribes" do they face "normal counterattacks." PolCouns sent the report and the transcript of Assistant Secretary Posner's press conference to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on October 26; to date there has been no official or unofficial response. Members of the Jewish community privately expressed satisfaction with the report's description of the circumstances they face in Venezuela. End summary.

PRESS LINKS VENEZUELA WITH CUBA

2. (SBU) Following the October 26 release of the IRF report (reftel), EFE wire service ran the story with the headline, "The U.S. Notes Restrictions on Religious Freedom in Cuba and Venezuela." This article was picked up by Fox News and the Venezuelan press, with El Universal, a major independent newspaper, also grouping the two countries in the headline of its October 27 article: "Report on Religious Freedom Criticizes Cuba and Venezuela." (Note: The EFE story appears to be based on the inclusion in the report's Executive Summary of Venezuela and Cuba in the list of countries with "Restrictions, Abuses and Concerns." This section also includes many other countries, such as Fiji, India, and Malaysia. End note.) While the headlines misleadingly suggest a strong connection between Venezuela and Cuba in the report, the articles themselves quite accurately reflected the report's main points, noting the GBRV "generally respected" religious freedom.

GBRV RESPONSE: IT'S POLITICAL

3. (C) PolCouns sent the report, and the transcript of Assistant Secretary Posner's press conference, to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) on October 26. To date the MFA has acknowledged receipt of the report, but, pointing to the absence of Minister of Foreign Affairs Nicolas Maduro, has not responded. The government paper Diario Vea published a short second page article October 28 stating that "all religions enjoy total freedom and respect" in Venezuela. It noted that only when people release "political diatribes" do they face "normal counterattacks." As an example, the

article mentioned that there has been a response to "some Jewish leaders who support antigovernment coup plots and other activities that are not religious, but clearly political." While not referring to the IRF report specifically, the article said that the accusation of religious persecution in Venezuela is part of the "media war" aimed at turning international public opinion against the GBRV and the Bolivarian Revolution.

JEWISH COMMUNITY AGREES WITH REPORT

¶4. (C) In a meeting with PolCouns October 28, leaders of Venezuela's Jewish community said that while there is freedom of religion in Venezuela, there is not freedom of expression, which necessarily affects the practice of religion (septel). Several members of the Confederacion de Asociaciones Israelitas Venezolanas (CAIV) Board of Directors separately expressed satisfaction with the report to PolOff October 29. Beatriz Rittigstein (protect), who leads a CAIV office dedicated to documenting anti-Semitic activity, called the report "extremely complete" in its descriptions of the incidents faced by different religious groups in Venezuela.

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